**The Causes of World War One**

*June 28 in Sarajevo*

We'll start with the facts and work back: it may make it all the easier to understand how World War One actually happened. The events of July and early August 1914 are a classic case of "one thing led to another" - otherwise known as the treaty alliance system.

The explosive that was World War One had been long in the stockpiling; the spark was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.

Ferdinand's death at the hands of the Black Hand, a Serbian nationalist secret society, set in train a mindlessly mechanical series of events that culminated in the world's first global war.

*Austria-Hungary's Reaction*

Austria-Hungary's reaction to the death of their heir (who was in any case not greatly beloved by the Emperor, Franz Josef, or his government) was three weeks in coming. Arguing that the Serbian government was implicated in the workings of the Black Hand (whether she was or not remains unclear, but it appears unlikely), the Austro-Hungarians opted to take the opportunity to stamp its authority upon the Serbians, crush the nationalist movement there and cement Austria-Hungary's influence in the Balkans.

It did so by issuing an ultimatum to Serbia which made demands that the assassins be brought to justice that effectively bypassed Serbia's laws. Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, was moved to comment that he had "never before seen one State address to another independent State a document of so formidable a character."

Austria-Hungary's expectation was that Serbia would reject the severe terms of the ultimatum, thereby giving her a reason for launching a limited war against Serbia.

However, Serbia had long had Slavic ties with Russia, an altogether different proposition for Austria-Hungary. While not really expecting that Russia would be drawn into the dispute to any great extent other than through words of diplomatic protest, the Austro-Hungarian government sought assurances from her ally, Germany, that she would come to her aid should the unthinkable happen and Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary. Germany readily agreed, and even encouraged Austria-Hungary's warlike stance.

*One Thing Led to Another*

So then, we have the following remarkable sequence of events that led inevitably to the 'Great War' - a name that had been touted even before the coming of the conflict.

\* Austria-Hungary, unsatisfied with Serbia's response to her ultimatum declared war on Serbia on 28 July 1914.

\* Russia, bound by treaty to Serbia, announced mobilization of its vast army in her defense, a slow process that would take around six weeks to complete.

\* Germany, allied to Austria-Hungary by treaty, viewed the Russian mobilization as an act of war against Austria-Hungary, and declared war on Russia on 1 August.

\* France, bound by treaty to Russia, found itself at war against Germany and, by extension, with Austria-Hungary following a German declaration on 3 August. Germany was swift in invading neutral Belgium so as to reach Paris by the shortest possible route.

\* Britain, allied to France by a more loosely worded treaty which placed a "moral obligation" upon her to defend France, declared war against Germany on 4 August. Her reason for entering the conflict lay in another direction: she was obligated to defend neutral Belgium by the terms of a 75-year old treaty. With Germany's invasion of Belgium on 4 August, and the Belgian King's appeal to Britain for assistance, Britain committed herself to Belgium's defense later that day. Like France, she was by extension also at war with Austria-Hungary.

\* With Britain's entry into the war, her colonies and dominions abroad variously offered military and financial assistance, and included Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa.

\* United States President Woodrow Wilson declared a U.S. policy of absolute neutrality, an official stance that would last until 1917.

\* Japan, honoring a military agreement with Britain, declared war on Germany on 23 August 1914. Two days later Austria-Hungary responded by declaring war on Japan.

\* Italy, although allied to both Germany and Austria-Hungary, was able to avoid entering the fray by citing a clause enabling it to evade its obligations to both. Italy was committed to defend Germany and Austria-Hungary only in the event of a 'defensive' war; arguing that their actions were 'offensive' she declared instead a policy of neutrality. The following year, in May 1915, Italy finally joined the conflict by siding with the Allies against her two former allies.

*The Tangle of Alliances*

Such were the mechanics that brought the world's major nations into the war at one time or another. It's clear from the summary above that the alliance system was as much at fault as anything in bringing about the scale of the conflict.

What was intended as a strictly limited war - a brief war - between accuser and accused, Austria-Hungary and Serbia, rapidly escalated into something that was beyond the expectations of even the most warlike ministers in Germany (and certainly Austria-Hungary, which quickly became alarmed at heightening tensions in late July and sought German reassurances).

- adapted from firstworldwar.com